

# **Behavior Change Techniques: Make Resolutions and Healthy Behaviors Stick**

*(From January 2013 newsletter)*

Whether you want to lose weight, spend less money, or quit smoking, adopting a new healthy behavior can be a challenge. Sticking to it is even harder. Even in mid-January, many people have already given up. But it's okay to start or re-start a healthy change any time during the year! These behavior change techniques will help you maintain healthy changes - for the New Year and beyond.

The Journal of Clinical Psychology recently published the following statistics for New Year's Resolutions in 2012:

- Percent of Americans who usually make New Year's resolutions: 45%
- Percent of people in their twenties who achieve their resolution: 39%
- Percent of people over 50 who achieve their resolution: 14%
- Resolutions maintained after just one week: 75%
- Resolutions maintained after one month: 64%
- Resolutions maintained after six months: 46%

A pattern is evident: many people do not maintain their resolutions. So how can you make healthy behaviors stick? Start by trying out the following behavior change techniques. Begin with how you define the change(s) you want to make.

## **Write out Clear Goals**

Scientists at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) suggest that one of the main reasons behavior changes are not maintained is because people often set unrealistic goals (such as losing 20 pounds in a month). In addition, many goals are too vague (such as simply, "losing weight"), leaving people without a specific way to reach their goals. Research on health behavior change and goal-setting identifies the acronym "S.M.A.R.T." for most effective goal-setting. Make sure your goal is:

- **Specific:** Precisely defined, not vague.

*“I will smoke half a pack instead of a whole pack each day” (instead of “I will cut down on smoking”)*

- **Measurable:** Use of quantitative units (such as numbers) that can be tracked for progress.

*“I will lose five pounds each month” (instead of “I will lose weight”)*

- **Action-oriented:** Related to behaviors you will DO, not the outcome.

*“I will only spend 40% of each paycheck, and save the rest” (instead of “I will save enough money to take a nice vacation”)*

- **Realistic:** Attainable - in terms of time, energy, and mental and physical health.

*“I will eat 200 fewer calories a day” (instead of “I will eat no more than 800 calories a day even though health experts say eating less than 1,200 can drain energy and leave a negative impact on health”)*

- **Time-bound:** Including a time frame.

*“I will have a two-hour Family Game Night once a week, beginning this Friday night” (instead of “I will spend more time with my family”)*

Once you have defined a S.M.A.R.T. goal, write it down! Research shows that people are more likely to accomplish goals when the goals are in writing.

After writing a clear goal, take some time to plan out what needs to happen in order to accomplish it.

## **Prepare and Plan**

Are you completely ready to change? Any lifestyle change requires some adjustments. It's okay to take a few days - or even weeks - to prepare for the adjustments your healthy change requires. Consider the following techniques:

- **Have resources on hand.** Old habits are hard to change. Sometimes we need physical tools around. One or more of these could be appropriate for your situation:
  - Distractions: Hobbies and other interests. These can help you get through cravings cycles for things such as food and tobacco.
  - Motivational images or words: A photo of people that care about you, a photo of a potential reward, or written words of encouragement. Sometimes we are more likely to push forward with a new habit if we remind ourselves of why we are doing it.
  - Contact information for your supportive network: These can include a workout buddy, on-call counselor, or support lines like the Illinois Tobacco Quitline.
  - Medications: Occasionally prescription or over-the-counter medications may be useful for getting over certain addictions such as smoking. Be sure to discuss any possible use of any medication with your physician.
  
- **Enlist social support.** Studies show that those with social support are more likely to be successful in health behavior change. Tell your friends, family, and co-workers about your resolution. Ask for their support. For instance, if you are trying to drink less alcohol, ask people not to drink around you. Consider individual therapy, such as counseling. Or try group therapy; a list of local self-help groups and meetings can be found [here](#). You may also want to inform your health care provider about your change. They may have more resources, such as educational materials, referrals, self-help kits, or more information about the above support networks.

After writing out your clear goal(s) and making all the necessary preparations, you are more than likely ready to commit.

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## Commit to Change

Intention to change is one of the most crucial factors in behavior change theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior. Here are three ways to physically fuel your intention:

- **Control your environment.** Change your surroundings to be more supportive of your goals. Want to quit smoking? Get rid of cigarettes and ashtrays, and avoid hanging out in areas where people smoke. Trying to save money? Don't browse through catalogs or tempting racks in stores.
- **Schedule it.** As you would a meeting, schedule specific blocks of time to focus on your goals. Planning and scheduling an hour-long cleaning session each Sunday afternoon is more likely to get you organized than assuming you will start sorting through boxes spontaneously one day.
- **Remind yourself.** Post notes or set alarms as reminders to practice your positive change. For instance, stick a note in your pantry or on your refrigerator that reminds you to choose healthy choices.

After committing to change, you are ready to start making changes slowly.

## Baby Steps

Research shows that behavior changes are more likely to stick when we do them in small steps. For instance, if you are a bacon-loving cheese addict, trying to take up a vegan diet right away is probably not going to be successful.

Making behaviors stick can involve a lot of difficult adjustments, but it is much easier to adjust slowly, using help when needed. Health behavior change is a complicated, dynamic process that many of us feel like we fail at time and time again. But one of the most important things to keep in mind is to not give up.

## **Don't Get Discouraged**

Relapsing back to unhealthy behaviors is common. You now have several tools to prevent this from happening. A number of reasons could cause a slip-up or two. Just don't let any slip-ups and relapses discourage you; instead remind yourself that no one is perfect, and give yourself credit for the progress you have made. Use slips as lessons; learn what situations uncover your "weaknesses" so that you can try to avoid these situations in the future. If you make just one resolution this year, let it be to stay persistent. Your health and happiness is worth it!